
Travel Agents

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Significant Points

- Travel benefits, such as reduced rates for transportation and lodging, attract many people to this occupation.
- Training at a postsecondary vocational school, college, or university is increasingly important.
- Industry consolidation and increasing use of the Internet to book travel will result in a decline in the employment of travel agents.
- Keen competition for jobs is expected.

Nature of the Work

Constantly changing airfares and schedules, thousands of available vacation packages, and a vast amount of travel information on the Internet can make travel planning frustrating and time-consuming. To sort out the many travel options, tourists and business people often turn to travel agents, who assess their needs and help them make the best possible travel arrangements. Also, many major cruise lines, resorts, and specialty travel groups use travel agents to promote travel packages to millions of people every year.

In general, travel agents give advice on destinations and make arrangements for transportation, hotel accommodations, car rentals, tours, and recreation. They also may advise on weather conditions, restaurants, tourist attractions, and recreation. For international travel, agents also provide information on customs regulations, required papers (passports, visas, and certificates of vaccination), and currency exchange rates.

Travel agents consult a variety of published and computer-based sources for information on departure and arrival times, fares, and hotel ratings and accommodations. They may visit hotels, resorts, and restaurants to evaluate comfort, cleanliness, and quality of food and service so that they can base recommendations on their own travel experiences or those of colleagues or clients.

Travel agents also promote their services, using telemarketing, direct mail, and the Internet. They make presentations to social and special-interest groups, arrange advertising displays, and suggest company-sponsored trips to business managers. Depending on the size of the travel agency, an agent may specialize by type of travel, such as leisure or business, or destination, such as Europe or Africa.

Working Conditions

Travel agents spend most of their time behind a desk conferring with clients, completing paperwork, contacting airlines and hotels for travel arrangements, and promoting group tours. During vacation seasons and holiday periods, they may be under a great deal of pressure. Many agents, especially those who are self-employed, frequently work long hours. With advanced computer systems and telecommunication networks, some travel agents are able to work at home.

Employment

Travel agents held about 118,000 jobs in 2002 and are found in every part of the country. More than 8 out of 10 agents worked for travel agencies. Nearly 1 in 10 was self-employed.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

The minimum requirement for those interested in becoming a travel agent is a high school diploma or equivalent. Technology and computerization are having a profound effect on the work of travel agents, however, and formal or specialized training is increasingly important. Many vocational schools offer full-time travel agent programs that last several months, as well as evening and weekend programs. Travel agent courses also are offered in public adult education programs and in community and 4-year colleges. A few colleges offer bachelor's or master's degrees in travel and tourism. Although few college courses relate directly to the travel industry, a college education sometimes is desired by employers to establish a background in fields such as computer science, geography, communication, foreign languages, and world history. Courses in accounting and business management also are important, especially for those who expect to manage or start their own travel agencies.

The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) offers a correspondence course that provides a basic understanding of the travel industry. Travel agencies also provide on-the-job training for their employees, a significant part of which consists of computer instruction. All employers require computer skills of workers whose jobs involve the operation of airline and centralized reservation systems.

Experienced travel agents can take advanced self-study or group-study courses from the Travel Institute that lead to the Certified Travel Counselor (CTC) designation. The Travel Institute also offers marketing and sales skills development programs and destination specialist programs, which provide a detailed knowledge of regions such as North America, Western Europe, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Rim.

Personal travel experience or experience as an airline reservation agent is an asset because knowledge about a city or foreign country often helps to influence a client's travel plans. Patience and the ability to gain the confidence of clients also are useful qualities. Travel agents must be well-organized, accurate, and meticulous to compile information from various sources and plan and organize their clients' travel itineraries. As the Internet has become an important tool for making travel arrangements, more travel agencies are using Web sites to provide their services to clients. This trend has increased the importance of computer skills in this occupation. Other desirable qualifications include good writing, interpersonal, and sales skills.

Some employees start as reservation clerks or receptionists in travel agencies. With experience and some formal training, they



Travel agents often recommend places to stay, eat, and visit to travelers.

can take on greater responsibilities and eventually assume travel agent duties. In agencies with many offices, travel agents may advance to office manager or to other managerial positions.

Those who start their own agencies generally have had experience in an established agency. Before they can receive commissions, these agents usually must gain formal approval from suppliers or corporations, such as airlines, ship lines, or rail lines. The Airlines Reporting Corporation and the International Airlines Travel Agency Network, for example, are the approving bodies for airlines. To gain approval, an agency must be financially sound and employ at least one experienced manager or travel agent.

There are no Federal licensing requirements for travel agents. However, nine States—California, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington—require some form of registration or certification of retail sellers of travel services. More information may be obtained by contacting the Office of the Attorney General or Department of Commerce in each State.

Job Outlook

Employment of travel agents is expected to decline through 2012. Most openings will occur as experienced agents transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Because of the projected decline and the fact that a number of people are attracted by the travel benefits associated with this occupation, keen competition for jobs is expected.

An increasing reliance on the Internet to book travel, as well as industry consolidation, will continue to reduce the need for travel agents. The Internet increasingly allows people to access travel information from their personal computers, enabling them to research and plan their own trips, make their own reservations and travel arrangements, and purchase their own tickets. Also, airlines no longer pay commissions to travel agencies, which has reduced revenues and caused some agencies to go out of business. However, many consumers still prefer to use a professional travel agent to ensure reliability, to save time, and, in some cases, to save money.

Moderating the employment decline, however, are projections for increased spending on tourism and travel over the next decade. With rising household incomes, smaller families, and an increasing number of older people who are more likely to travel, more people are expected to travel on vacation—and to do so more frequently—than in the past. Business travel also should bounce back from recession and terrorism related lows as business activity expands. Further, as U.S. businesses open more foreign operations, and businesses, in general, increasingly sell their goods and services worldwide, more business travel is anticipated.

There are other factors spurring demand for travel agents that will moderate any decline. Most notable is the increasing affordability of air travel. Greater competition between airlines, especially from low-cost carriers, has resulted in bringing airfares within the budgets of more people. In addition, American travel agents now organize more tours for the growing number of foreign visitors. Also, travel agents often are able to offer various travel packages at a substantial discount.

The travel business is sensitive to economic downturns and international political crises, when travel plans are likely to be deferred. Therefore, the number of job opportunities for travel agents fluctuates. The best opportunities will be for those travel agents that can utilize the Internet for their own operations to reduce costs and better compete with travel suppliers.

Earnings

Experience, sales ability, and the size and location of the agency determine the salary of a travel agent. Median annual earnings of

travel agents were \$26,630 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$20,800 and \$33,580. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$16,530, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$41,660.

Salaried agents usually enjoy standard employer-paid benefits that self-employed agents must provide for themselves. Among agencies, those focusing on corporate sales pay higher salaries and provide more extensive benefits, on average, than do those that focus on leisure sales. When they travel for personal reasons, agents usually get reduced rates for transportation and accommodations. In addition, agents sometimes take “familiarization” trips, at no cost to themselves, to learn about various vacation sites. These benefits attract many people to this occupation.

Earnings of travel agents who own their agencies depend mainly on commissions from travel-related bookings and service fees they charge clients. Often it takes time to acquire a sufficient number of clients to have adequate earnings, so it is not unusual for new self-employed agents to have low earnings. Established agents may have lower earnings during economic downturns.

Related Occupations

Travel agents organize and schedule business, educational, or recreational travel or activities. Other workers with similar responsibilities include tour and travel guides, and reservation and transportation ticket agents and travel clerks.

Sources of Additional Information

For further information on training opportunities, contact:

► American Society of Travel Agents, Education Department, 1101 King St., Alexandria, VA 22314.

For information on training and certification qualifications, contact:

► The Travel Institute, 148 Linden St., Suite 305, Wellesley, MA 02482.